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Contextualism about Belief Ascriptions

Roger Clarke

This chapter does two main things by way of discussing contextualism about belief ascriptions: on one hand, I will survey a range of different accounts of belief recently defended in print; on the other, I will sketch some ways of arguing for contextualism about belief ascriptions. Most of the accounts of belief I'll survey do not entail b-contextualism,¹ but instead take belief to be situation-sensitive in one or another way. One of the lines of argument I'll sketch, then, aims to motivate b-contextualism by appeal to belief's situation sensitivity.

The first part of the chapter, then, is given over to a survey of situation-sensitive accounts of belief. §1 sets up a problem all of these views aim to solve, and §§2-5 discuss four different types of situation-sensitivity. Few of the philosophers whose views are covered here explicitly consider the question of b-contextualism—that is, sensitivity of belief ascriptions to the ascriber's context, rather than sensitivity of belief to the believer's situation—and none of them explicitly defend b-contextualism.² In §6, I supply a sketch of an argument that any of these views of belief as situation-sensitive gives motivation for adopting b-contextualism as well.

The final two sections get at b-contextualism more directly. First, §7 outlines Eric Schwitzgebel's phenomenal, dispositional account of belief. Unlike the views surveyed in §§2-5, this is an explicitly b-contextualist account.

Finally, I offer a belief-analogue of a familiar sort of argument for k-contextualism: case pairs. §8 describes a single agent whom one speaker correctly describes as believing and another speaker correctly describes as not believing a proposition *p*.

1 Full and Partial Belief: A Lottery Problem

All of the situation-sensitive accounts of belief we are about to encounter are motivated at least in part³ by the problem of reconciling full belief (outright belief or belief *simpliciter*) with partial belief (degree of belief or credence). It's natural to

¹ For convenience, I'll use "b-contextualism" as shorthand for "contextualism about belief ascriptions." I'll also use "k-contextualism" in a similar way when it helps to avoid ambiguity.

² Well, almost none. Sturgeon (2008: 142) very briefly argues that "believes *p*" is a gradable expression and therefore context sensitive.

³ The accounts of Weatherson (2005) and Ganson (2008) are also centrally motivated by debates over subject-sensitive invariantism. Both hope to, as Weatherson puts it, "do without" pragmatic encroachment about the normative dimension of knowledge: that is, both views have it that there is pragmatic encroachment on justified belief, but only because there is pragmatic encroachment on belief *simpliciter*. (Weatherson's later writing on this topic no longer claims to do without non-doxastic pragmatic encroachment on knowledge completely, having been persuaded by Stanley's Ignorant High Stakes bank case; see Weatherson 2012: 77.) Bach (2005), similarly, adopts a situation-sensitive view of belief in objecting to k-contextualism.

think the two notions of belief relate in a straightforward way: to fully believe something is to have a high enough degree of belief. That is, the following is a natural thought:

Simple Threshold There is a threshold value $r < 1$ such that, for any agent S , time t , and proposition p , S believes p at t iff, at t , S has credence in p above r .⁴

(Note that *Simple Threshold* is situation-insensitive: the threshold value r applies to all agents and propositions, at all times.)

The difficulty for *Simple Threshold* stems from the conflicting norms of rationality on full and partial belief. Full belief is standardly thought to be governed by a norm of *logical* coherence: one ought not to believe contradictions, and one ought to believe the logical consequences of one's beliefs. Partial belief, on the other hand, is standardly thought to be governed by a norm of *probabilistic* coherence: one's credences should obey the axioms of probability.

Logic and probability give us different norms, but why think they conflict? The lottery problem of Kyburg (1961) gives a nice illustration. Suppose we have a fair lottery with n tickets—that is, exactly one ticket will win, and each ticket has an equal chance of winning. Where p_i is the proposition that ticket i wins, we have $\Pr(p_i) = 1/n$, for any $1 \leq i \leq n$. Rationality should, then, permit one to assign credence $1/n$ to each proposition p_i . Now consider the proposition that ticket i will *lose*, equivalent to $\neg p_i$. If our credences obey the probability axioms, we will assign this proposition a credence of $(n-1)/n$. By making the lottery large enough—that is, by increasing the number of tickets n —we can then bring our credence in ticket i 's losing as close to 1 as we like. In particular, whatever the threshold r for full belief, we can set our credence in ticket i 's losing above r ; thus, we have a full belief that ticket i will lose, for each i . But it is a logical consequence of these n beliefs that *no* ticket will win. Thus we have contradictory requirements: logical coherence requires us to believe no ticket will win, but we assign credence 1 to the proposition that exactly one ticket will win. Something has to give.

Each of the views we will consider in this section avoids the lottery problem by postulating one or another kind of situation sensitivity. Since *Simple Threshold* postulates a single threshold value necessary and sufficient for belief *for all agents, times, and propositions*, all of these views, by virtue of their situation sensitivity, violate *Simple Threshold*. In §2, we find views on which the **threshold** for full belief varies across situations. In §3, we find views on which different situations induce different **partitions** on the space of possible worlds. Effectively, then, different situations make different sets of propositions relevant; the views of belief we'll encounter in that section involve quantifying over a set of relevant propositions in

⁴ This threshold principle is sometimes called “the Lockean Thesis,” following Foley (1993: ch. 4). And, indeed, Foley does endorse the principle I call *Simple Threshold* in that chapter. However, Foley's “Lockean Thesis” is a principle about *rational* belief and *rational* degrees of belief, and I prefer to follow Foley on this point: the Lockean Thesis, then, says that there is a threshold value s such that one is *rational* to believe p iff one is *rational* to have credence in p above s . Above-threshold credence in something one does not believe is, then, impossible according to *Simple Threshold*, but merely irrational according to the Lockean Thesis.

bridging full and partial belief. §4 considers views on which the bridge between full and partial belief quantifies over the live **options** available to the believer, much as the previous section quantified over relevant propositions. All three of these sections deal with views on which partial belief is situation-invariant, but the bridge principle between full and partial belief is situation-sensitive. In §5, on the other hand, we encounter views on which full belief is situation-sensitive because **credences** themselves are situation-sensitive. In each section, I will describe how the relevant sort of situation-sensitivity solves the lottery problem, and also discuss how such an account of belief might be independently motivated. After all, we hope for more than an *ad hoc* response to a very specific sort of puzzle.

Finally, in §6, I consider generally how a view of belief as situation-sensitive in one of these ways may ground a case for contextualism about belief ascriptions.

Much as I mean in the following sections to give the impression of widespread support for situation-sensitive views of belief, there is hardly a consensus that something like this is correct. See Stalnaker (1984: 80–1), Maher (1986: 383), Foley (1993: 199), and Kaplan (1996: 101) for denials of belief’s situation-sensitivity; and see Buchak (2014); Ross and Schroeder (2014) for recent arguments that belief cannot be reduced to credence at all, let alone in one of the situation-sensitive ways to be outlined in the following.

2 Shifting Thresholds

Notice the order of quantifiers in *Simple Threshold*:

Simple Threshold There is a threshold value $r < 1$ such that, for any agent S , time t , and proposition p , S believes p at t iff, at t , S has credence in p above r .

In setting up the problem, we first suppose a threshold value r to have been given, then construct a lottery large enough to get S ’s credence in losing over r : then we conclude that S must believe, inconsistently, that ticket 1 is a loser, that ticket 2 is a loser, ..., that ticket n is a loser, and also that one of these tickets is not a loser.

Let’s try modifying the threshold principle by shuffling our quantifiers:

Shifty Threshold For any agent S and time t , there is a threshold value $r < 1$ such that, for any proposition p , S believes p at t iff, at t , S has credence in p above r .

Here’s the difference. *Simple Threshold* has it that there is some threshold value dividing belief from non-belief across the board, regardless of situation, believer, or proposition believed; *Shifty Threshold*, on the other hand, says that the difference between belief and non-belief in any given proposition does come down to whether one’s credence is above or below some threshold, but agents in different situations can have different threshold values.

Now, when we try to set up the lottery problem, we can’t run the usual construction. That is, given *Shifty Threshold*, we can’t count on the threshold value r being determined in advance of our specifying a situation—in advance of our specifying the size of the lottery. Perhaps a rational agent faced with a lottery of size n will always have a threshold for belief set so that $r > (n-1)/n$, so that the agent does

not believe that ticket i will lose, for any i . If we can avoid attributing the latter beliefs, we avoid attributing inconsistency. Problem solved.

How can we motivate such a view of belief? Ganson (2008) gives one line of argument. If one believes that p , we can expect one to act as if p . That is, if one believes that p , and one thinks that the best thing to do given p is A , we expect one to do A . She suggests the following condition as necessary for belief that p : “believing that p to a degree which is high enough to ensure that one is willing to act as if p is true, where one’s being willing to act as if p means that what one is in fact willing to do is the same as what one would be willing to do, given p ” (Ganson, 2008: 451).

Similar remarks, albeit less clearly endorsed, can be found in Fantl and McGrath (2009: ch. 5).

Shifting-threshold views of belief can be found in: Kyburg (1983); Bach (2005); Ganson (2008); Sturgeon (2008); Fantl and McGrath (2009: ch. 5); Leitgeb (2013, 2014, forthcoming).

3 Shifting Partitions

Leitgeb (2013, 2014, forthcoming) invokes shifting thresholds for full belief, as described in the previous section, but also posits another way belief might be situation-sensitive: the way we *partition* logical space may change across situations.

Here’s a way of understanding the idea: suppose we have a quantificational account of full belief in the following sense: we say that an agent believes p if, or only if, *for all (relevant) propositions q* , p bears some relation to q . Examples: the agent’s credence in p conditional on q is high enough, i.e., above some threshold s (Leitgeb); the agent’s preferences conditional on q are the same as the agent’s preferences conditional on the conjunction p and q (Weatherson). We can understand a partition of logical space as generating a set of propositions over which such a clause quantifies. The partition, so to speak, gives us a collection of atomic propositions.

In general, on this sort of view, more coarse-grained partitions (allowing fewer atomic propositions) make full belief easier to come by; more fine-grained partitions (allowing more atomic propositions) make it harder.

Leitgeb appeals to shifting partitions to explain the lottery case. He says that, when the question at hand is *which ticket will win?*, the appropriate partition has n cells, one for each ticket, containing those worlds where ticket i wins (for $1 \leq i \leq n$). On the other hand, when the question at hand is *will my ticket win?*, the appropriate partition has only two cells: a cell where one’s ticket wins and a cell where one’s ticket loses. In the latter case, but not the former, Leitgeb’s framework allows an ideally rational agent to believe that her ticket will lose. But in the case where our ideally rational agent believes her ticket will lose, the partition of logical space does not allow her to frame the question whether someone else’s ticket will also lose; thus we avoid the contradictory requirement that she believe of each ticket that it will lose.

Lotteries aside, why accept partition-sensitivity? In a nutshell, the main benefit of Leitgeb’s view is that it lets us keep three apparently conflicting desiderata on a unified view of full and partial belief: logical norms for full belief, probabilistic norms for partial belief, and a threshold principle linking the two. The lottery problem is simply an illustration of the apparent conflict between these three desiderata—one application among many Leitgeb provides.

Shifting-partition views of belief can be found in: Weatherson (2005, 2012, 2014); Leitgeb (2013, 2014, forthcoming).

4 Shifting Options

In a series of papers (Weatherson, 2005, 2012, 2014), Brian Weatherson defends a view of belief that

start[s] with the functionalist idea that to believe that p is to treat p as true for the purposes of practical reasoning. To believe p is to have preferences that make sense, by your own lights, in a world where p is true.” (Weatherson 2005: 421)

Here’s a concise statement of the basic idea:

Very roughly, to believe that p is simply to have the same attitudes, towards all salient questions, unconditionally as you have conditional on p . (Weatherson 2014: 17, emphasis added)

In particular, if one believes that p , then one prefers A to B conditional on p iff one prefers A to B unconditionally. The emphasized clause above gives us Weatherson’s situation-sensitivity:⁵ the question (for example) whether it would be better to accept or reject some bet on whether p is only salient in situations where the bet might be offered; in other situations, one’s attitudes towards this question make no difference to one’s beliefs.

Apply this to the lottery. Plausibly, in a lottery situation, one has some options that one disprefers unconditionally, but would prefer conditionally on ticket i ’s losing: for example, *throw away ticket i* , or *sell ticket i for a minimal sum*. It is difficult to construct a lottery scenario where one’s preferences are unchanged by conditionalizing on ticket i ’s losing—so it is difficult to construct a lottery scenario where one believes ticket i will lose, by Weatherson’s lights.

Note that Weatherson’s view as articulated here does *not* commit him to *Shifty Threshold* (§2). Recall, with added emphasis:

Shifty Threshold For any agent S and time t , there is a threshold value r such that, for any proposition p , S believes p at t iff, at t , S has credence in p above r .

Weatherson’s view does not entail that, even having fixed an agent and a time, there will be any threshold value appropriate for all propositions. Consider an agent faced with two options, A and B . Suppose the agent’s credences and utilities are as in the following table:

⁵ See also §3: the less-simplified version of Weatherson’s view also involves shifting partitions. Simplifying less: if one believes that p , then for all active propositions q , one has the same attitudes conditional on q alone as one has conditional on the conjunction $p \& q$. The clause emphasized here yields shifting partitions; see Weatherson (2005: 423) for discussion of what it is for a proposition to be “active”.

	$p \& q$	$p \& \neg q$	$\neg p \& q$	$\neg p \& \neg q$
Credence	90%	5%	3%	2%
$u(A)$	0	0	100	0
$u(B)$	0	40	0	0

Table 1: Some credences and utilities.

For this agent, A 's unconditional expected value (EV) is 3 units, and B 's is 2 units, so the agent unconditionally prefers A to B . Likewise, the agent prefers A to B conditional on q (positive EV versus zero EV, conditional on q). But conditional on p , the agent prefers B to A . So on (a simplified version of) Weatherston's view, the agent cannot believe p , because of her conditional and unconditional preferences with respect to A and B . On the other hand, her preferences with respect to A and B are consistent with her believing q . Therefore, for all that we've said about the agent's preferences, she might believe q , but she cannot believe p . According to *Shifty Threshold*, though, she must believe p if she believes q , since she has a higher credence in p (95% versus 93%).

The shifting-threshold views cited at the end of §2 can all be read as shifting-options views as well; see also Weatherston (2005, 2012, 2014); Fantl and McGrath (2009).

5 Shifting Presuppositions

Clarke (2013) takes a slightly different tack. All the above accounts take credence to be situation-invariant, but give a situation-sensitive bridge principle linking credence to full belief; Clarke instead takes credence itself to be situation-sensitive, and identifies full belief with credence 1.

In fact, Clarke (2013) argues for two theses we might want to separate. These are, first, that belief is credence 1, and, second, that credence is situation-sensitive, with the believer's situation determining a space of alternative possibilities. Clarke's argument for the package of both theses as follows: (a) belief-as-credence-1 is usually thought to be too demanding—belief is common, credence 1 is rare—but the reasons for thinking so are undermined by the situation-sensitivity of credence; (b) belief-as-credence-1 avoids notable drawbacks of the simple threshold view; and (c) accepting the situation-sensitivity of credences does not undermine the usual benefits of credence-centric approaches to epistemology and philosophy of science. Now suppose we're unconvinced by the case for (a) and/or (c). Then we might want to reject the identification of belief with credence 1, but we might nevertheless think that full belief is situation-sensitive in roughly the way he claims credence is.

We can think of the present sort of situation-sensitivity as analogous to a relevant alternatives account of knowledge: to believe that p is to rule out (doxastically), or reject, all relevant alternatives to p . One might lose a belief that p not because one has changed one's mind about whether any possibility is actual, but because more possibilities have become relevant or salient. This sort of shift gives us a response to the lottery: in a lottery situation, one is likely to take seriously—to count as

relevant—the possibility where one’s ticket wins; and unless one has nefarious friends with inside information about the lottery draw, one will have no reason to rule this possibility out. Thus, contrary to *Simple Threshold*, one will not believe that one’s ticket will lose, since there is a relevant counter-possibility one does not rule out.

Note that the response to the lottery problem given here does not necessarily require any particular thesis connecting belief and credence. One can certainly tell the same story in terms of credences given certain such theses—Clarke identifies doxastic “ruling out” with assigning zero credence, so that one lacks belief in the lottery case because one gives positive credence to one’s ticket winning—but the story stands on its own terms. One might, for example, think belief cannot be reduced to credence at all, as Buchak (2014) and Ross and Schroeder (2014) have recently argued.

What advantages, then, are there to postulating this sort of situation-sensitivity for full belief, setting credence aside? Greco (forthcoming) develops an anti-idealizing motivation for this sort of picture: we finite agents cannot, in general, deal with the full range of possible worlds, and so simplify our cognitive lives by selectively ignoring irrelevant possibilities. Greco also argues for a parallel between this situation-sensitive picture of belief and conversational dynamics: the way the set of doxastically relevant possibilities can change mirrors the way conversationally relevant possibilities change in response to information entering the conversational common ground; Clarke (manuscript) pursues a similar line of argument.

Shifting-presupposition views of belief can be found in: Clarke (2013, forthcoming); Greco (forthcoming), and, arguably, Levi (1980). See also Nozick (1981: 96ff) for a sketch of a similar proposal.

6 From Situation Sensitivity to Context Sensitivity

We’ve now seen four kinds of situation-sensitive account. One’s situation might determine a *threshold* such that one believes only those propositions in which one has credence over the threshold; it might determine a *partition*, contributing a set of propositions over which some quantifier in a condition on belief ranges; it might determine a set of *options*, again governing a quantifier in a condition on belief; or it might determine a set of *presuppositions*, bounding a space of salient possibilities. None of the authors cited above argue explicitly for b-contextualism,⁶ but neither do they explicitly reject it. In this section, I sketch how one might motivate b-contextualism based on accepting a situation-sensitive account of belief.

So suppose at least one of these accounts is correct. Then belief is situation sensitive, which I take to mean (for present purposes) that belief is not a binary

⁶ Leitgeb is carefully neutral on this question: he gives a formal framework for representing ideally rational belief featuring something like situation- or context-sensitivity, but he leaves it open how the framework is to be interpreted. It could be that what an ideal agent believes is situation-sensitive, or that what an agent is correctly described as (rationally) believing is context-sensitive. See Leitgeb (2014: 149ff) for discussion. See also footnote **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

relation between agent and proposition, but a ternary (at least) relation between agent, proposition, and some feature(s) of the agent's situation.⁷

Here are two hypotheses about how the situation-sensitive belief relation might figure in the semantics of belief ascriptions. First hypothesis: when we ascribe to *S* the belief that *p*, we diagonalize. That is, the implicit third argument place is filled by *S*'s situation. Second hypothesis: the implicit third argument place is filled in some other way, determined by the context of ascription. Sometimes *S*'s situation provides the missing parameter, but sometimes it comes from elsewhere.

I think the second hypothesis is more plausible, no matter which sort of situation-sensitivity we posit. We ascribe belief for lots of reasons: sometimes I make claims about another's beliefs because I want to predict how they will behave; sometimes because I care how they would answer a question my interlocutors are thinking about; sometimes because I want to ascribe group membership. These aims (and others unmentioned) can come apart: it's not hard to imagine someone who says one thing—sincerely!—and does another. (In the next section, such cases will play a crucial role for Schwitzgebel's contextualist view of belief; see the articles cited there for a plethora of examples.)

In short, a situation-sensitive view of belief lends itself naturally to a contextualist view of belief ascriptions. This contrasts with the analogous view about knowledge: pragmatic encroachment on knowledge is usually set up as an alternative to k-contextualism. Why the difference? It might be that the "know"-analogue of the previous paragraph's claims about belief ascriptions is less attractive: we might be happy to admit variation or flexibility in our reasons for ascribing belief, but think there is less variation in our reasons for ascribing knowledge. I won't pursue that thought further here; but the parallel with pragmatic encroachment is worth exploring.

7 Schwitzgebel's Phenomenal, Dispositional Account

Schwitzgebel (2002) defends a "phenomenal, dispositional account of belief". The central notion for Schwitzgebel's account is of a *dispositional stereotype*: for each proposition *p*, there is a cluster of dispositions we are apt to associate with belief that *p*. For example, the belief that there is beer in the fridge is associated with dispositions to open the fridge if someone asks for beer, to say "Yes" if asked whether there is beer in the fridge, to experience surprise if one sees no beer on looking in the fridge, and so on. None of these dispositions is a necessary condition for belief that there is beer in the fridge: if I am stingy, I won't open the fridge when you ask for beer; if I am uncooperative, I won't answer your questions; if I believe the beer is invisible, I won't be surprised at seeing no beer in the fridge; but despite

⁷ This is not the only way of understanding situation sensitivity. Situation sensitivity might mean instead that belief is a binary relation between an agent and a proposition, but one whose holding or otherwise depends on some third situational factor. The "present purpose" I appeal to in the main text is: building a plausible case for b-contextualism based on situation sensitivity. For the argument sketched in the main text to succeed, it is true, this understanding of situation-sensitivity as ternarity would need to be defended; but for the present, I'll settle for its being one plausible interpretation of the situation sensitive views surveyed above. Thanks to Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa for pressing me on this point.

all this I might believe there is beer in the fridge. Nevertheless, *typically*, when one believes that there is beer in the fridge, one has these dispositions and others like them.

According to Schwitzgebel, then, to believe that *p* “is nothing more than to match *to an appropriate degree and in appropriate respects* the dispositional stereotype for believing that *p*” (Schwitzgebel 2002: 253, emphasis added). When we are happy to count a stingy and uncooperative agent as unequivocally believing there is (invisible) beer in the fridge, it is because they possess enough of the other stereotypical dispositions: e.g., dispositions to use the proposition that there is beer in the fridge as a premise in practical reasoning, to open the fridge when thirsty, and so on.

The emphasized words in the quote above lead to Schwitzgebel’s contextualism. Different conversational purposes and assumptions can mean differences in both how closely an agent must match the stereotype to count as believing, and what sort of deviations from the stereotype are excusable. One and the same agent might match the stereotype closely enough and in the ways that count for one conversation, but not for another.

Suppose, for example, that a child studying for a test reads, “The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620,” and remembers this fact. She is a bit confused about what Pilgrims are, though: She is unsure whether they were religious refugees or warriors or American natives. Now does she believe that the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620? She deviates from the stereotype in some respects: She will not conclude that Europeans landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620; and when she imagines the event, she may bring some inappropriate images to mind. In some contexts—e.g., if we are talking about her likely performance on a history dates quiz—we might be inclined to describe her as believing this fact about the Pilgrims; in other contexts we would not. (Schwitzgebel 2002: 257)

Let us add: not only are we inclined to say different things about the child in different conversations, but our inclinations track the truth conditions of the things we might say. Thus, an utterance of “[the child] believes the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620” would be true in a conversation where her beliefs matter primarily as a matter of predicting her performance on a test; yet the same utterance would be false in a conversation where it is important whether she can make appropriate inferences from the Pilgrims’ landing.

This example of the confused child is one of many Schwitzgebel offers in a series of papers (2001, 2002, 2010) under the heading “in-between believing”. On Schwitzgebel’s view, belief that *p* is a vague property: some agents definitely believe that *p* and some definitely lack belief that *p*, but others are *in between* believing and not believing. This is to be understood in terms of dispositional stereotypes: the clear cases are agents who robustly match (or robustly fail to match) the dispositional stereotype for belief that *p*; the in-between cases are agents who match the stereotype partially or incompletely. The in-between cases will generally leave us uncomfortable simply saying that the agent does or does not believe that *p* (as indeed it seems misleading simply to say without elaboration that the child described above believes the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620). However, conversational context can specify a subset of the stereotype, or a degree of matching, as relevant. In such conversations, we may be happy to attribute belief or lack thereof without further

elaboration; and we may utter apparently conflicting things about the same agent in different conversations.

Schwitzgebel writes:

This vagueness and context-dependency does not undermine the value of belief ascription, but rather makes it flexible and responsive to our needs as belief ascribers. Similar vagueness and context-dependency can be found in the ascription of character traits, providing them with a similar flexible utility. The numerous examples in this paper will, I hope, help to support the view that talk about belief can be vague and flexible in this way and still quite useful—more useful in fact than an approach that rigidly insists on determinate yes-or-no answers to all questions about what people believe. (Schwitzgebel 2002: 253)

8 Truman

I conclude by offering a story analogous with k-contextualists' case pairs. For reasons of space, I won't give an extensive discussion of it—if the Bank Cases teach us anything, it's that millions of interpretations of such stories are possible. Nevertheless, I think it worth showing that something along the lines of the best-known argument for k-contextualism may also be available for b-contextualism.

There's a bird in the garden. Truman, an avid birder, is watching the bird from inside the house. He's writing a list of the bird species he sees in the garden this morning. After a moment's careful observation, he adds Western Wood-Pewee to his list. He then stands up and leaves for another part of the house, out of sight and out of earshot of the yard. All this is being recorded and broadcast live: Truman is on a reality TV show. Shortly after Truman leaves his view of the yard, the broadcast shows an exterior shot of the bird, who briefly sings; Truman does not hear it, as is clear to the show's audience.

Alima and Arthur are watching Truman on TV. They are fans of the show, and aspiring birders. They enjoy the show partly because they can learn about birds by watching Truman identify them. They see Truman as an authority on birds. Arthur is looking away when the cameras show Truman adding Western Wood-Pewee to his list, but he sees the bird. He asks Alima what kind of bird it is. Alima replies, "Truman thinks it's a Western Wood-Pewee."

Elsewhere, Bart, Betty, and Begbie are also watching Truman's show. They, too, are birders, and they are watching Truman's show with their entire birding club. Unlike Alima and Arthur, Bart and Betty know that a Rare Bird Alert has recently been issued in the Los Angeles area, where Truman's show is filmed, and where Bart and Betty live: an Eastern Wood-Pewee has recently been sighted in the area. Los Angeles is well outside the Eastern Wood-Pewee's range. Here's what Sibley (2003, p. 280) says about the Eastern Wood-Pewee, *Contopus virens*: "Essentially identical in habits and appearance to Western Wood-Pewee

[*Contopus sordidulus*], but range barely overlaps; reliably distinguished only by voice, most easily the song.”⁸

When they see the bird sing on TV (after Truman has absconded), a dispute breaks out among the birding club about whether the bird in Truman’s yard was a Western or an Eastern Wood-Pewee. As a measure to ease tensions and resolve the dispute, Bart suggests polling the opinions of the assembled experts; Betty offers to record the votes. Since everyone present regards Truman as an authority on birds, Betty asks which camp Truman belongs to: should he be recorded as voting Eastern or Western? Begbie says, pointing at the TV screen, which now shows Truman’s list, “He thinks it’s a Western.”

Bart responds, “No no, he doesn’t think it’s a Western. He wrote that it’s a Western Wood-Pewee, but he didn’t hear it sing. He hasn’t even thought about whether it’s a Western or an Eastern—he knows you can only tell the difference by listening. Don’t put him on either side.”

Both Alima and Bart speak naturally and truthfully. It seems Alima is correct to attribute to Truman the belief that the bird is a Western Wood-Pewee, and it seems Bart is correct to deny the same belief of Truman. This needs to be explained.

Contextualism about belief ascriptions allows a straightforward explanation: Alima and Bart seem to speak truly because they do. Despite the surface appearance of a contradiction, they do not, in fact, contradict one another. It is possible for Truman to “believe” the bird is a Western, in Alima’s sense, and also not “believe” the bird is a Western, in Bart’s sense.

Note that the following type of response does not help the anti-contextualist. One might respond: “I wouldn’t say what Bart says. Rather than deny that Truman thinks it’s a Western, I would say something else—maybe that he thinks it’s a Western, but you shouldn’t include his vote because his belief isn’t reliable, or something like that.” But the contextualist needn’t argue that what Bart says is better than this alternative. What, I claim, needs to be explained is that what Alima and Bart each say is natural and acceptable; I do not claim that there are no other things, even in some sense better things, Bart might have said instead.

An effective anti-contextualist response needs to address what Bart says, not what he could have said instead. As I said above, space prevents a full discussion of possible responses to the case. My aim in this brief section is just to sketch the beginning of a case-based argument for b-contextualism, analogous to the traditional case-pair-based argument for k-contextualism.⁹

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⁸ Thanks to Rebecca Gindin-Clarke for suggesting the example of Eastern and Western Wood-Pewees.

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